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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001796

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SUBJECT: AKASHI "SOMEWHAT ENCOURAGED," BUT NOT CLEAR WHY

REF: COLOMBO 1794 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead. 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Japanese envoy Akashi is "somewhat encouraged" from his visit to Sri Lanka. He found President Kumaratunga eager to move forward on talks, while the LTTE's Thamilmichelvan complained that a "no war, no peace" situation was not satisfactory. Opposition Leader Wickremesinghe said the UNP would not join the National Advisory Council until talks started, and JVP leader Somawansa supported talks but was distrustful of LTTE. Ongoing debate on LTTE's commitment to federalism as solution is probably more sound than fury. We believe resumption of talks largely held back by Southern political factors, which prevent LTTE's real intentions from being tested. END SUMMARY.

Akashi "Somewhat Encouraged"

12. (C) Japanese Special Envoy Yasushi Akashi on November 2 briefed selected Chiefs of Mission (US, UK, Netherlands, Australia, Norway, European Community) at the conclusion of his visit to Sri Lanka. In sum, Akashi said, although he had been pessimistic before he arrived, he was now "somewhat encouraged." He had met with President Kumaratunga, with Opposition Leader Wickremesinghe, with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) political chief Thamilmichelvan, and with a number of other minor political leaders. He met Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Amarasinghe at the latter's request. He had also visited Trincomalee and Batticaloa in the east.

President Wants to Talk

13. (C) Akashi said that he had a good meeting with President Kumaratunga, who told him she wanted to resuscitate the peace talks. She asked him to convey the message to the LTTE that she was willing to meet 75 percent of LTTE demands on the agenda for the talks -- they needed to do the rest. Akashi clarified that this meant that the GSL had agreed to begin talks solely on the basis of the LTTE's Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) proposal, that upon conclusion of an agreement the interim authority would be implemented, and that while it was being implemented, talks on final settlement issues would begin.

Thamilmichelvan Relaxed, Situation Needs to Change

14. (C) Akashi said that Thamilmichelvan, who had arrived back from his month-long visit to Europe just two hours before they met, seemed relaxed and upbeat. Thamilmichelvan said the situation in Sri Lanka was at an important turning point, and the opportunity needed to be seized. The present situation -- no war, no peace -- was not acceptable, and there was a need to move forward. It was also necessary to maintain and strengthen the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA). Akashi said that he raised the issue of killings of political opponents and child abductions; Thamilmichelvan responded with the usual explanations. Thamilmichelvan complained, again as usual, of the lack of humanitarian assistance to the North and East.

15. (C) European COMs at table all noted that Thamilmichelvan had received strong messages from all countries he visited on his recent tour:
-- Killings must stop
-- Child abduction/recruitment must stop
-- LTTE should reaffirm commitment to a settlement based on a federal system.

All present noted that there is considerable humanitarian assistance flowing to the North and East (as well as assistance to other parts of the country) and that this should be brought to the LTTE's attention.

JVP Wants Talks, Distrusts LTTE

16. (C) Akashi during this visit met for the first time with a JVP representative, the party's eminence grise, Somawansa Amarasinghe. (This meeting was at the JVP's request.)

Akashi said Somawansa maintained the JVP was not opposed to a negotiated solution within a federal structure. Akashi noted, however, that Somawansa evinced a great distrust of the LTTE.

Ranil Won't Join Advisory Council

17. (C) Opposition Leader and former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe repeated to Akashi that the United National Party (UNP) would not participate in the President's proposed National Advisory Council (NAC) at this time, but would do so after negotiations resumed. Akashi said that, interestingly, Thamilselvan told him that the LTTE appreciated Wickremesinghe's additional statement that the UNP would support the government if it began negotiations based on the ISGA and the Oslo Declaration. Thamilselvan also said he feared the NAC could be a diversion from the negotiations.

18. (C) Further on this subject, during a lunch hosted by the UNP's Milinda Moragoda for Akashi later that day, Milinda noted press reports that Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga would meet the same day but said that this did not mean -- contrary to some media speculation -- that the UNP would participate in the NAC. Milinda said that he hoped, however, that the meeting would be the start of a bilateral consultation process between the two leaders. Moragoda also noted that it took nine months from the establishment of the CFA until the UNP government was able to begin talks with the LTTE.

Federalism or Not?

19. (C) During Akashi breakfast there was also extended discussion of the LTTE's refusal to reaffirm commitment to federalism, especially in context of the forthcoming book by LTTE ideologue Balasingham in which he reportedly states that LTTE has not made a commitment to federalism and has not given up on independence if federalism fails. Consensus was that this was less dramatic than it seemed:

-- Oslo Declaration is itself not a firm commitment (parties committed themselves only to "explore a solution based on a federal structure").

-- The LTTE has always maintained it has other options if talks failed to find an acceptable solution.

COMMENT

10. (C) It is not quite clear why Akashi pronounced himself "somewhat encouraged" -- perhaps only because he found no one eager to resume fighting. Our opinion, which Ambassador conveyed to Akashi, is that GSL ability to move forward on peace process is largely stymied by internal Southern political factors: President's reliance on the JVP, intense personal rivalry between President and Wickremesinghe and the closely-linked desire of Kumaratunga to abolish the Executive Presidency. In our view the President needs to find a comfort level to move ahead with or without the JVP, and Ranil and Kumaratunga need to establish at least a modus vivendi in support of the peace process. If this happens, the LTTE will have to either return to the talks or show that its ostensible reasons for not returning -- lack of Southern consensus and GSL unwillingness to discuss ISGA -- are a facade.

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